

Arlington Memorial Bridge: Watergate and Bridge Plaza
Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway over Independence Avenue
extended, along the Potomac. Adjacent to the Arlington
Memorial Bridge and the Lincoln Memorial
Washington
District of Columbia

HAER No. DC-7A

HAER
DC.
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563-A-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

ARLINGTON MEMORIAL BRIDGE:
WATERGATE AND BRIDGE PLAZA

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Location: Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway over Independence Avenue extended, along the Potomac. Adjacent to the Arlington Memorial Bridge and the Lincoln Memorial at the west end of the Mall in Washington, D.C.

UTM: 18/321980/4306270
Quad.: Washington West

Date of Construction: Designed 1929, Completed 1932

Architects: McKim, Mead and White, New York, New York; William Mitchell Kendall, Designer

Engineer: John L. Nagle, Designing Engineer, U.S. Corps of Engineers, W. J. Douglas, Consulting Engineer

Contractor: Grier-Lowrance Construction Company - foundations
National Construction Company - superstructures

Present Owner: National Capital Region
National Park Service
Department of the Interior

Present Use: Three-fold in its use, this structure serves as a seawall for the Potomac, a watergate with steps leading from the Potomac to Washington, and a bridge carrying the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway traffic to the west end of the Mall.

Significance: The Seawall, Watergate and Bridge Plaza were designed in 1928 as part of the Arlington Memorial Bridge complex. The Seawall is patterned after the Arlington Memorial Bridge in its detailing and dimensioned granite facing, while the Bridge Plaza mirrors the entrance of the Memorial Bridge in its design and with its statuary. Although designed and built almost thirty years after the McMillan Commission was disbanded, this structure reflects the original intention of the Commission--to build a memorial bridge on this site which would join the North and South.

Historian: Elizabeth M. Nolin, 1988

The Seawall and Watergate were designed in the "Grand Manner"¹ as part of the Arlington Memorial Bridge complex to complement the Mall that stretches from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial and from there across the Arlington Memorial Bridge to Arlington National Cemetery, in compliance with the McMillan Plan.² The Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway approach and the Memorial Bridge are symmetrically aligned from a center point in the Lincoln Memorial, each of them angling off the center axis of the Mall $23^{\circ}55'31''$.³ The Watergate and Seawall lie between these two roadways and the Potomac.³ The Parkway approach carries traffic to the west end of the Mall and onto Memorial Bridge. The Parkway also passes under the approach, across the two sets of watergate steps, under the abutment of the Memorial Bridge, and onto Ohio Drive. Each of the three structures is constructed of reinforced concrete, and faced with light gray granite, dimensioned masonry to match the Arlington Memorial Bridge.

The Watergate is a section of an arc consisting of forty granite steps that are 206 feet wide at the top and 230 feet at river level. Its original intent was truly that of a "watergate," a place where boats could tie up⁴ and where dignitaries could be welcomed to the city of Washington.⁵ The Seawall acts as a retaining wall for the Watergate steps and both act as buttressing for the Parkway Approach, the Arlington Bridge and the Lincoln Memorial.

The history of these structures is tied in very closely with the design and construction of the Arlington Memorial Bridge. Prior to the construction of this area, a number of discussions had been held regarding the location and interaction of these structures. As originally designed by William M. Kendall of McKim, Mead and White, this area contained the Seawall and Watergate steps

¹ In the Grand Manner - from the French, recalling the time of Louis XIV. It is a method of building referring to thoroughly planned and designed architecture and architectural grounds of monumental proportions.

² Established in 1901 by Senator James McMillan, the commission consisted of two architects, Daniel Burnham and Charles McKim, a landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and a sculptor, Augustus St. Gaudens. The commission had been assigned to study the park system in the Washington, D.C., area and make recommendations for its improvement.

³ Arlington Memorial Bridge Commission, Watergate and Bridge Plaza Superstructure, Layout and General Notes, July 15, 1929.

⁴ "Lincoln Memorial Area Transformed into Beauty Spot," The Sunday Star, September 28, 1930, Washington, D.C., 1.

⁵ Sue A. Kohler, The Commission of Fine Arts: A Brief History 1910-1984, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), 21.

and a drive along the Potomac on the north side of the Bridge.⁶ Colonel U.S. Grant III, Executing and Disbursing Officer for the Arlington Memorial Bridge Commission, expressed concern that Kendall's design would not be able to handle the traffic projections of the future and therefore suggested a roadway which would pass under the Parkway approach, bisecting the Watergate steps and going under the abutment of the Arlington Memorial Bridge, much as today.⁷ Kendall felt Grant's idea was unacceptable because a roadway crossing the steps would destroy the integrity of the overall design. The Fine Arts Commission asked Kendall to rework the design to solve this problem. His solution: a 500 foot tunnel under the steps. Once again Grant expressed concern. He asked the commission to reconsider his original suggestion.⁸ The Commission, not content with any of the solutions at this point, considered another. This new design replaced the steps with a retaining wall and promenade along the roadway. The final solution was a set of narrow steps with the roadway at the foot of the steps and another set of steps below the roadway to accommodate the ebb and flow of the river.⁹ This was the first road of this type in the parks in Washington, D.C.¹⁰

Two pairs of bronze equestrian statues further add to the grandeur of this site where the Lincoln Memorial Circle is intersected by the Bridge and by the Parkway approach. The pair representing the Arts of War are located at the Arlington Memorial Bridge while the pair representing the Arts of Peace are located at the Parkway approach. Designed by sculptor James Earle Fraser, the Arts of Peace symbolize Music and Harvest, and Aspiration and Literature.¹¹

A competition was announced in the Washington Post on August 4, 1929 regarding a design for a pair of statues to depict the Arts of Peace, but due to lack of funds they were not constructed until 1949. Count Sforza, Prime Minister of Italy, in a good will gesture towards the United States, paid for the casting of the sculptures which cost \$200,000. Approximately two years

⁶ Kress-Cox Associates, P.C., Historic Structures Report, Arlington Memorial Bridge, (Washington, D.C.: 1986), 108.

⁷ ibid.

⁸ ibid, 111.

⁹ ibid, 113.

¹⁰ "Tunnel Under Memorial Bridge O.K.'d to Prevent Future Congestion," The Evening Star, September 20, 1927, Washington, D.C., 1.

¹¹ Program for the dedication of the statues, MLK, WR "Arlington Memorial Bridge" File.

later the statues were dedicated.¹²

Research has not turned up the actual construction details regarding the Seawall, Watergate, and Bridge Plaza. The lack of available information could be due to the subordinate nature that these structures played in the monumental project of designing and constructing the Arlington Memorial Bridge.

¹² Program for the dedication of the statues.

Bibliography

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